A LETTER TO A FRIEND ON *Commerce and Free Ports,* AND *LONDON-DOCKS.*

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BRITISH MUSEUM

INTRODUCTION.

THE following is a Copy of a Letter, written to a friend at his requeſt, and intended only for his private information.

It contains a haſty ſketch of the heads of a converſation, on two or three queſtions intereſting to commerce, port-accommodations, and the principles of a free trade. It was written under every diſadvantage, on the preſſure of a particular moment, that would neither admit of delay or correction.

The Letter was never intended for publication, and nothing but the peculiar circumſtances of the preſent moment could have apologized for the circulating

culating a few copies into private hands. No liberties have been taken with the Letter; and it is hoped, that the same may be received under the impression and circumstances with which it was at first written, and as intended to convey general hints and out-lines in favour of plans, at present under public discussion, that may tend to public utility.

London,
March 26, 1796.

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A LETTER

TO A FRIEND

On Commerce and Free Ports, and LONDON-DOCKS.

London, Aug. 16, 1795.

DEAR SIR,

THE following detached hints I have drawn up at your requeſt haſtily, in conſequence of a converſation on the evils of the port of London, and on the general intereſts of commerce and revenue; and how far the intereſts of both were connected with, and would be ſupported by, the formation of Wet Docks for the port of London, if connected with a bonding ſyſtem or a plan of Free Ports. Time, and the objects in view being preſſing and requiring diſpatch, would not permit more than conveying the haſty outlines of general hints.

STATE OF ACCOMMODATIONS FOR THE PORT OF LONDON.

The Legal Quays

are limited in extent, inadequate to wants, and incapable of extenſion.

The ſame as at the rebuilding of London in 1666, extending only from the Tower to London-Bridge, and only 1464 feet long.

Sufferance-Wharfs

are diſperſed, inadequate in extent, ſituations, and convenience, inſecure from fire, weather, and plunder. A converſion of them into Legal Quays no extenſion, but only conſtituting a ſufferance into a right.

The River

inadequate to the ſhipping that frequent it:

about 9,900 coaſters.

3,500 veſſels from foreign parts.

13,400 veſſels arrive annually in the port of London.

The

The general Moorings for ſhips lie between London-Bridge and Limehouſe; ſome few at Deptford, ſome few at Blackwall. — Moorings may be divided into three ſtations:

Upper, for ſmaller ſhips.
Middle, for larger ſhips.
Lower, for large ſhips.

Not more than 800 ſail of ſhips can lay at Moorings afloat at low water.

Navigation is frequently impeded.

Accidents, Loſſes, and Delays, are frequent and annually to a great extent. They are as fatal to commerce as they are to revenue.

Shipping, Commerce, Revenue, have greatly increaſed, for the port of London, within this century, and bears a conſiderable proportion to that of the whole kingdom, while London poſſeſſes the worſt accommodations of any trading-port. To you it would be needleſs to ſtate the tables of their reſpective proportions and increaſe.

Docks are neceſſary for the accommodation and reception of ſhipping; and are ſo projected as to permit ſhips to unload in them, either on the dock-quays, or into lighters, if cargoes are wiſhed to be landed at the preſent Legal Quays or at other wharfs.

A Lighter-Dock is attached to the Wet Dock, for the admiſſion and accommodation of a number of lighters to go in or out every tide.

Ships in Dock will diſcharge with more facility and diſpatch than in the river, and the riſk and diſtance of lighter-navigation to the preſent Legal Quays much leſs than the preſent lighter-navigation in the river to the Legal Quays.

HINTS ON COMMERCE, REVENUE, AND FREE TRADE.

Under theſe general outlines I ſhall confine myſelf to thoſe great leading points which I conceive are immediately intereſting to government.

I. The encouragement and extenſion of commerce.

II. The ſecurity and increaſe of revenue.

Commerce is the parent of revenue, and whatever tends to give encouragement and diſpatch to the one, will give ſecurity and increaſe to the other.

Regulations for the ſecurity and collection of revenue will eaſily ſuggeſt and accommodate themſelves to the commerce, in all its various ſhapes; and they might be ſo modified as to give freedom to import and export, without deranging the ope-

rations of commerce, the ſecurity of revenue, or the convenience of the ſtate. Two plans preſent themſelves:

I. The making of England a great depôt for commerce, by a general bonding ſyſtem.

II. The making it a general Free Port.

A general bonding ſyſtem to transfer the payment of duties from the time of import to that of conſumption would little change the preſent ſtate of things reſpecting commerce and revenue, beyond the momentary delay of a few months in the firſt year, during the change or operation of old ſyſtems for new. Exchequer-bills, or a vote of credit, would unite the two plans, and link together the great chains or relationſhip of revenue to commerce. Succeeding years would regulate themſelves.

To revenue it would give greater eaſe, convenience, and ſecurity, than in its preſent inſecure and expenſive ſyſtem, which is ſo much open to peculation,

lation, evaſion, and plunder, though under the eyes of a legion of inſpectors and watchmen. The ſecurity would be good, by the poſſeſſion of the commodity itſelf, and the bond of the importer. The experiment has been tried in the Eaſt-India trade, which forms one of our great commercial pillars, and alſo in rums and in tobacco, without loſs, detriment, or inconvenience, to revenue.

To the merchant, it would give command of capital and increaſe of faculties; and, in proportion as he threw them into his commercial concerns, his induſtry and enterprize would tend to give a ſpur to the ſeeking and creating new markets, and the giving increaſe to public revenue.

In the preſent ſtate of things, revenue calls for a large portion of the capital of the merchant, by anticipating the payment of duties at the moment of importation, where they are frequently locked up for months, until goods are landed and markets of conſumption or exportation are found for reimburſement. On exportation, delays farther ariſe from the recovery of drawbacks, independent of

frequent loſſes of duty when paid on importation, occaſioned by accidents and fire. In many caſes, duties have been impoſed where ſhips have been loſt before goods could have been landed. A ſyſtem founded on bad policy, as revenue implies a toll on a commodity, to be returned in the price of that commodity on its conſumption.

The revenues of England, which are above ſixteen millions a year, are partly internal and partly commercial. The revenue from cuſtoms forms about ſix millions a year; of which, about four millions (or a fourth part of our annual income) is the neat ſum paid into the Exchequer. Drawbacks and expenſes form the other two. The delays, expenſes, and temptations, occaſioned by a ſyſtem of heavy duties, drawbacks, and bounties, are great and many; and, perhaps, greater than would attend a more ſimple and leſs complicated ſyſtem of forming England as a great commercial depôt, and of laying a ſmall regulating duty on import, as a kind of regiſter-commerce, and another ſmall duty on exportation.

At preſent, government borrows of the merchant, annually, a capital of ſix millions, by anticipation, until conſumption or exportation takes place; and the drawbacks on the latter are recovered with great delays and heavy charges. It may admit of a queſtion, whether this momentary anticipation of duties and delays on drawbacks are not more injurious to the intereſts of commerce and the welfare of the ſtate than any benefit to the revenue, by the temporary command of capital? I conceive it better for government to make occaſional temporary loans, at an intereſt on the ſecurity of the revenue, than to continue the preſent ſyſtem. The merchant muſt and will apportion his returns and gains, not on the coſt of the commodity only, but on the advance and delays he meets with in the depoſit and return of his duties; and, inſtead of meeting a home-conſumption or a competition in foreign markets, on the loweſt rates and feweſt charges, he circulates his commerce under the deareſt rates; creating, at the ſame time, the heavieſt drawbacks upon natural induſtry and national advantages. We hamper

per commerce for the ſake of revenue, inſtead of encouraging the one to promote the other.

To the natural expenſe of collecting and watching the revenue on commerce, muſt be added a great additional one of an armed fleet, of cutters or veſſels, to enforce and protect the revenue-laws.

With all the guards to revenue, and caution in its laws, a very extenſive commerce is carried on through the crevices or defects of thoſe laws; and we diſcover how much is done to evade, leſſen, or poſtpone, the payment of duties. Guernſey forms a great depôt of commerce for England, both to the fair trader and to the ſmuggler; and, in peace, Dunkirk and Oſtend became thoſe great depôts to avoid or poſtpone the payment of duties. Merchandizes are houſed without duties by the fair trader, until the moment of conſumption, or until convenience ſuits a regular import and payment of duties into England. To the illicit trader, they are perpetual magazines or ſtore-houſes, and within a few hours ſail of an extenſive ſea-coaſt in the channel.

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An illicit commerce is carried on to England to an immenſe extent. The reduction of the duties on tea gave the ſtrongeſt proof of the magnitude of its conſumption, and the extent of its trade, in its legal and illegal form; the former being now increaſed from ſix to twenty millions of pounds. High duties have and ever will occaſion ſimilar examples, and occaſion indirect, inſtead of direct, channels of trade. The temptations and evaſions are too ſtrong to be ſuppreſſed by penalties and riſks of ſeizure. The revenue is defrauded, and high duties form, as it were, part of the capital of the illicit trader; and his gains, deducting all his riſks and loſſes, always interfere with the fair trader and with the revenue. Smuggling commands an immenſe active floating capital, and is ſo extenſive, and reduced to ſuch a regular ſyſtem, as to be currently inſured, at a regular premium, by a ſaving in the duties.

The beſt ſecurity againſt illicit trade is a general reduction of duties on a bonding ſyſtem, and to impoſe duties inſtead of prohibitions on many articles of commerce, that can now only be imported for exportation,

exportation, and are only exported to be ſmuggled back again without the duty. It would ſecure and increaſe revenue, leſſen the expenſes of guarding and watching of it, and all that ſyſtem of connivance, which is frequently too ſtrong and too alluring to reſiſt in the very officers, whoſe duty it is to protect and to detect.

It may admit of ſome conſolation, that this illicit commerce, if it did not infringe on revenue-laws, would be, and often proves, in many other reſpects, beneficial to the general intereſts of the country, at the time it was lucrative to the undertakers.

In wars, the effects of a free trade are ſtrongly marked by the increaſe of a legalized trade in neutral bottoms, who become the great carriers in a regular line of commerce, with all the duties that are impoſed upon it in time of peace, from the ſecurity of their navigation, and at a leſs expenſe. States are frequently obliged in war to relax in their ſyſtems, and to encourage or receive their ſtores, ſupplies, and commerce, in neutral bottoms. Holland, Oſtend, and Hamburg, are alſo ſtrong examples

amples how far a free trade or a neutral port, in times of war, have and will encourage and protect commerce, and how much nations give to foreigners what might have been ſecured to themſelves in peace or other ſyſtems.

In the preſent ſtate of things, England approaches nearer to a free trade than moſt are aware of. Duties and reſtrictions impoſed for revenue, encouragement to navigation and manufactures, or to counterpoiſe the natural advantages or reſtrictions of other ſtates, have only created ſimilar returns. The clogs have been mutual, and the weights in each ſcale nearly equipoiſed, while the whole ſyſtem of high duties, drawbacks, and bounties, have tended only to create intricacy, expenſe, and evaſions. The competition or rivalſhip ariſing from the advantages of induſtry, climate, products, and an exchange of wants, continue the ſame, and break through all the impediments which reſtrictions, taxes, and wars, impoſe upon commerce.

It is, I conceive, a miſtaken idea to make commerce wholly ſubſervient to revenue and regulations. It checks induſtry and the operations of trade. Commerce is little elſe than a mutual exchange ariſing from climate, products, and a circulation of wants, increaſed by the calls of induſtry and the progreſſive improvements of ſociety. Induſtry is the great ſpring to wealth and to property: to man it is as bountiful as nature is to vegetation, and poſſeſſes within itſelf the means of creating and ſupplying wants. Commerce is only the medium of circulation, or a large field open to the faculties and advantages of every ſtate, and where every nation, by a mutual exchange of wants and of products, might become great gainers without a loſs, and promote, by thoſe exchanges, the proſperity and welfare of each other. Commerce needs not the aid of monopolies, wants, or regulations, to ſupport it; induſtry, freedom, and peace, are its beſt ſupporters.

Whoever has watched the operations of commerce will find that it has proſpered in proportion

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as the principles of free trade have been adopted, and thoſe ſtates have generally thriven the moſt that have encouraged ſhipping, which has, in its turn, given birth to induſtry, wealth, commerce, and revenue. With theſe principles, ſtates have poſſeſſed means or powers of import, export, or conſumption.

Holland, a country ſmall in extent, frugal in its manners, almoſt without natural products, and preſerved from inundation by art, at a great annual expenſe, commanded an extenſive line of commerce, until convulſed by political conſiderations. Its trade was free, and the courſes of exchange, its uſual attendant, have been extenſive and beneficial. Its duties on import were ſmall, and alſo ſmall on export, and, from governing itſelf by natural or occaſional wants, or advantages of markets and exchanges with other countries, it became the great carrier, importer, and exporter, for them.

England has products, faculties, and advantages, natural and acquired, which few nations poſſeſs. She has little to fear on any change or revolution

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in the commercial ſyſtem of Europe. If monopolies have been adopted by European ſtates as the beſt means of making and ſecuring natural or cultivated advantages, England has held the balance in the ſcale of commerce; and, in proportion as the reſtraints and fetters upon commerce are removed, ſhe will retain and extend thoſe advantages.

Great as the trade and revenue of England are, compared with former times and other countries, they might be greatly extended and improved by giving encouragement to induſtry on pacific plans and of more liberal commercial ſyſtems. Induſtry, want, and conſumption, have gained ſuch an aſcendency in Europe, that, independent of its convulſed political ſtate and its exhauſted reſources as to war, it will be alive to all the calls of induſtry on a peace, and the checks that have been given to cultivation and conſumption will give the moſt powerful calls for ſupplies in a more tranquil ſtate.

The

The principles of commerce have changed and are changing. They have, within this century, both undergone and created great revolutions in the ſtate of Europe, and will undergo a ſtill farther change; and it is more than probable that the navigation of the Scheld and the Meuſe will be the reſult of the war. It becomes an object of policy and of conſideration how far England will ſeize the moment to open its doors and avenues to a free trade, as a counterpoiſe, either on a general or a partial ſcale of a free trade. London, from its capital, ſituation, and conſumption, as well as vicinity to foreign markets, will always command the means of great depôts; but there may be caſes where Free Ports in the channel, to touch at, or to land and load for foreign markets, might be made with advantage, from diſpatch in time, economy in charges, and be more within the command of winds.

France and the other European powers, from neceſſity and rivalſhip, will open their doors to trade and ſupplies under fewer reſtrictions than formerly, and will encourage ſhipping, commerce, agricul-

ture, and induſtry, as the ſources of wealth and of revenue. Our preſent commercial ſyſtems will undergo a revolutionary change, not ſo deſtructive or convulſive as political revolutions, but ſuch as will tend ultimately to encourage induſtry, and the circulation and ſupply of national wants; and that ſtate is the wiſeſt that the ſooneſt prepares to meet the growing charges in commercial ſyſtems, by *giving*, inſtead of *following*, examples. Monopolies were formerly privileges in favour of induſtry, they are now burthenſome to the ſtate, and their jarring intereſts are the greateſt bars to national improvements. I am aware that the principles of a free trade will agitate a number of queſtions which are ſtrongly rivetted by habits and prejudices, independent of private intereſts; but apprehenſions are ſometimes ſtronger than evils, and thoſe very objects that were once the ſources of alarm and of jealouſy have often proved, and been reſorted to at laſt, as the beſt friends to private induſtry and public advantage. Machineries, &c. have rather created, in manufacturies, a want of hands, than thrown them out of employment.

From

From the ſtate of Europe, England might become the great importer and manufacturer. Its Free Ports would form the magazine, and the world become its cuſtomer. The port of London might become one of the great depôts of commerce for internal and external purpoſes, and Wet Docks form the great key-ſtone, and give

To Shipping, ſafety, diſpatch, and economy:
To Commerce, convenience, ſecurity, and diſpatch:
To Revenue, protection, ſecurity, and increaſe.

Government would be benefited by the formation of Wet Docks for the port of London, as ſhips would diſcharge in nearly one-third of the time they do at preſent. Cargoes ſhould be landed as ſoon as poſſible after arrival. Whatever gives diſpatch gives ſecurity, and prevents evils; and no agent on ſuch a plan would be ſo powerful as a greater increaſe of landing-officers for the facility of commerce and the increaſe of revenue.

To revenue it would give increaſe and economy, as well as diſpatch and ſecurity in its collection:

More inſpection and more control:

More command and control over officers:

More convenience to the officers themſelves:

Fewer temptations and opportunities to ſmuggling and plunder:

Occaſion fewer loſſes, fires, and accidents, ſo detrimental to property, to commerce, and to revenue:

Be a ſaving in ſalaries: and

Leſſen the neceſſity of a legion of ſubordinate officers, appointed to watch the ſhips and goods on-board, or in the tranſit of goods in lighters until they are landed and duties are aſcertained.

About 1600 men are employed in the Cuſtoms for the port of London, and the major part of them are employed on river-duty as watchmen. On-board of Eaſt-Indiamen, about thirty officers are appointed; and on-board Weſt-Indiamen, five or ſix, who are *generally* fed and maintained at the expenſe of the ſhip. Other ſhips are in proportion. Subordinate officers are often one of the greateſt cauſes of peculation and plunder.

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The evils of the port are great and many, and merchants and revenue-boards have their time taken up, not in the operations of commerce, but in the petty details of petitions and references occaſioned by the evils and delays of the port.

Docks would little derange revenue in its operations; commerce not ſeeking a new port but accommodation in an old one. They would alſo condenſe the ſeat of commerce and of revenue by the diſpatch they would create at the very moment means were acquired for their extenſion.

Docks are become neceſſary as a common port-accommodation, to give ſecurity to ſhipping, commerce, and revenue, and to give freedom to the navigation of the river. If a bonding-ſyſtem was adopted, they would be requiſite; but, if connected with the greater ſyſtem of a free trade, and to form part of a great whole, they would be indiſpenſably neceſſary to favour the extenſion of that object.

Docks would alſo form one of the great links in the chain of commerce, and unite more cloſely our internal with our external trade.

Canals and roads form the great arteries of internal commerce.

They are approximating to London;

They will aid agriculture and cultivation;

Give birth to induſtry;

Give facility to old, and extenſion to new markets.

Docks would increaſe the trade of England and of London; and there would be no danger of the rivalſhip of London with the out-ports.

Whatever invigorates commerce will extend to both, and create new calls to induſtry. Wants would create wants, and give the means of ſupplies.

I have ſaid little about the *locality* of Docks.—Wapping has its accommodations from its vicinity to the city, the cuſtom-houſe, and the ſeat of commerce;

merce; and of giving to POSTERITY convenience, economy, and diſpatch. I have alſo ſtated little about the neceſſity or advantages of them. Evils and benefits muſt ſpeak for themſelves. Private intereſts have natural claims of attention; the intereſts of commerce and of revenue have alſo ſimilar claims. The injuries they annually ſuſtain from accidents, loſſes, and delays, are great, and many, and more than would, in two or three years, purchaſe the fee-ſimple of moſt of the private intereſts that would be affected by the formation of Docks.

Private intereſts are few; ſome of them are permanent and freehold; others are local, for leaſe, life, or temporary ſervices. The city would have its rights or its tolls little affected. The quays and warehouſes on each ſide the river are out of its limits or juriſdiction, and form the great depôt for that commerce, which ſhe cannot ſhip, land, or houſe, within her own boundaries. London commands three-fifths of the commerce of England; and its legal quays cannot accommodate one-fourth of its trade. It is better, therefore, I conceive, for

commerce

commerce and for revenue to ſatisfy private intereſts, than to ſuffer annually great permanent injuries.

I am, with great regard,

Dear Sir,

Your ſincere and obedient
humble ſervant,

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THE END.